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ABSTRACT

Second language acquisition (SLA) research is examined in terms of what might be used in the planning, design, and implementation of language courses. A conception of language and the communicative use of language that is appropriate for formal language teaching and learning is discussed, and different conditions are described under which second and foreign languages are taught, especially in Southeast Asia. Important differences in the assumptions about language are examined, including assumptions of learning and language use that underlie SLA research and those that are appropriate for formal language teaching. General implications are discussed. A way is suggested in which applied linguists and teaching professionals concerned with course design for language learning might conduct their own formal and informal research into language acquisition. Contains 11 references. (LB)

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ON THE REVELANCE OF SLA RESEARCH TO CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING

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0 INTRODUCTION

In reviewing research into natural second language acquisition (SLA) for its contribution to the formal teaching second and foreign languages we need to establish the claims, interests and requirements of the practical undertaking first. Otherwise there is a risk that the conception of language and language learning appropriate for research will over-ride the perhaps different view that is required for the formal teaching of languages. One way to do this is to set up a frame of reference, so to speak, for the interests of formal language learning against which we might test the relevance of SLA research. Moreover, there is a need for applied linguistics and language teaching to know how to interpret those findings of SLA research that are relevant and illuminating and to place them into an appropriate framework for interpretation. This is the aim of the present paper, to take a broad view of SLA research and to consider how in general its research perspectives and findings might be implemented in the planning, design and implementation of language courses.

I propose to fulfil this aim

1 by establishing a conception of language and the communicative use of language that is appropriate for formal language teaching and learning
2 by describing the different conditions under which second and foreign languages are taught, particularly in Southeast Asia
3 by examining certain some important differences in the assumptions about language, learning and language use that underlie SLA research and those that are appropriate for formal language teaching
4 by discussing some general implications that flow from SLA research
5 by suggesting a way in which applied linguists and teaching professionals concerned with course design for language learning might go about their own research (formal and informal) into language acquisition.

1 THE FRAME OF REFERENCE

The frame of reference for SLA research is constituted by the view of language and language use that is apppropriate for second and foreign language pedagogy and by the conditions under which second and foreign languages are learned in Southeast Asian classrooms. These are the "givens", so to speak, which SLA might be able to inform and illuminate.

Language and language use

In attempting to establish a frame of reference for the relevance of SLA research to the concerns of language teaching we should be clear about what counts as success in language acquisition in formal settings. It is a reasonable to interpret the term *language* in the context of this seminar as referring to language use. Further, successful language use is to be defined in social and educational terms. That is, the point of reference and the criterion of relevance for the applicability of research are the real world demands of the kinds of communication that language courses aim at. These demands are stringent and various, and touch on many aspects of communication that are not even considered (let

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alone studied systematically) in theoretical or applied research of any kind. In general, the canons of excellence for language use are set by the real world actors who directly or indirectly control these matters. A good university essay, considered as a communication or an instance of language in use, is by and large what academics expect of such documents. Good engineering reports are what those who commission and read them expect them to be and so on. These then are the real goals of language learning. The published or implied goals of language learning programmes (whether designed by individuals and groups more or less autonomously in tertiary institutions or published in Ministry of Education curricula for system-wide use) will in almost every case underestimate what is required for communication in real world contexts.

The over-riding criterion of adequacy on communicative proficiency that is sketched above needs to be kept to the fore in interpreting academic research into language and its acquisition because, almost inevitably, academic research will adopt a perspective that is narrower than that appropriate for formal language teaching and learning and its real world goals.

Conditions of language learning

In trying to interpret what might be relevant from SLA research to the formal teaching of languages, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, it is well to bear in mind the great diversity of languages taught in the region (English being only one of them) and the variety in the status of these languages and in the conditions under which they are taught in different countries. Languages that are not necessarily the first languages of all the students in the population are used as the medium of instruction while others are taught as second or foreign languages. These languages might be introduced at the very beginning of schooling, late in the primary school or at the beginning of secondary education. Some languages may be introduced to beginners at tertiary (university or college) level.

Given this diversity, we cannot assume that potentially interesting findings of SLA research will be universally applicable. One will need to take account of the age of the learners, the stage of their learning (beginning, intermediate, advanced) and the status of the language (second, foreign, medium of instruction) and opportunities for use outside the classroom before one can determine whether or not a particular piece of research is relevant.

2 LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SLA RESEARCH

Language development

Against this background we can consider some important differences in the view of language and language learning typically adopted by academic researchers and that which is appropriate for the formal teaching and learning of languages in classroom settings. In pointing out differences of this kind, I am not criticising SLA research necessarily: rather I am drawing attention to differences in the viewpoints of researchers and those concerned with language teaching.

Differences in assumptions held by theoretical linguists, on the one hand, and educationists on the other, about the meaning of the term *language* can be seen in published research into first language acquisition -- work which is of potential interest where English is used as the medium of instruction. Klein (1986:3), for example, observes that "beyond puberty, our command of language shows little progress" (except in vocabulary). Now for anyone with first hand experience in mother tongue teaching or where English is the medium of instruction, it is clear that there is enormous progress evident in, for example, the sorts of formal writings produced by a year 8 student when compared to what he or she will produce in year 12. Clearly, the conception of what counts as language mastery that Klein refers to is quite different from that which is appropriate in educational settings, whether one is

concerned with first, second or foreign language learning. It is of no account for practical purposes that the different quality and quantity of writing that the year 12 student can produce is the result of non-linguistic abilities: that sort of distinction, though appropriate for theoretical research aimed at isolating the development of specifically linguistic abilities, does not hold in applied contexts. Those concerned with language education in educational institutions are responsible for promoting language-using ability in all its dimensions.

Cognitive pre-requisites for language use

When one considers second language acquisition, the real world of education requires us to make more precise distinctions than theoretical researchers are inclined to make. Klein (1986:4) distinguishes what he calls monolingual first language acquisition, bilingual first language acquisition (where the child learns two languages more or less concurrently) and second language acquisition proper, so to speak, where the second language is acquired after first language acquisition is well advanced. He observes that in the case of this kind of second language acquisition, "the cognitive prerequisites are more readily available than in the case of first language acquisition" (5). By this he means that once, for example, the principle of 'deictic shift' (which is necessary for the appropriate use of deictic terms such as *I, now, here*) and the cognitive categories of time (required for tense marking in English and German for example) have been acquired, they are available for any other language learning that the child may undertake.

For many second language learners, the cognitive support for the communicative use of language is far from complete, even when the second language is acquired after puberty. There are, for example, large numbers of children in ESL classes in Australia who have come to English-medium schools after completing primary schooling in another language. The difficulty for these children is twofold: they need to master English and also use the new language to perform cognitive tasks (those associated with secondary schooling) for which they have not used any language previously. Much the same goes for the many undergraduate students of Engineering and Economics and so on (in Thailand and other countries) whose subject textbooks are available only in English: they have the double task of learning to process material in a foreign language and at a university level. This demand is of considerable difficulty for many students who have to read the same sort of material for the same purpose in their mother tongue (in Australia, for example, as student counsellors are aware).

We can contrast the task of students who need to read educational material in a foreign language and the cognitive demands it imposes with the considerably easier task that confronts, say, a class of English-speaking university scholars learning to read German or Russian texts in their own discipline. In other words, the question of the "cognitive prerequisites" for language use cannot be taken as unimportant in second and foreign language learning. Huebner (1988:8) draws attention to the neglect of these factors in SLA research.

Performance conditions

In the case of foreign language learning, other problems arise in interpreting SLA research. When the focus of SLA research is on language learning in natural settings, whatever proficiency the learners have attained has been developed through communication under real world conditions of use. Typically one finds that such learners are fairly proficient at comprehending speech delivered at native speaker rate and under all the other difficulties that might arise in every day life (background noise, the distortion and degradation of signals in telephones and the sound tracks of films and so on).

When one comes to foreign language learners who have limited opportunities for real communication (no matter how much practice is provided in the classroom) these conditions can be a severe source

of difficulty, which of course SLA research in natural settings has no reason to take into account. For this reason the significance of these factors (called performance conditions in Kelly 1981) is not realised, even though they need to be dealt with in classroom teaching if communication, particularly aural comprehension, under genuine conditions of use is to be possible. Examples of these performance conditions include the variation in task difficulty for aural comprehension caused by such factors as familiarity with the accent used, rate of utterance, amount of background noise and the operation of what have been called fast speech rules (Dirven and Oakeshott 1984). Hieke puts it thus:

> "As language is converted into speech ... a remarkable metamorphosis takes place, in the course of which a host of performance rules convert citation forms, not just into dynamic speech, but at the same time into another dimension: from formal content into speech events." (1987:125)

From the perspective of mainstream text and sentence linguistics and acquisition research that share the same perspective, one looks at the properties of the text or discourse and loses sight of other important dimensions of the task. The text of an academic lecture, for example, even if faithfully transcribed with its hesitations and false starts and so on, does not adequately capture all that takes place or allow one to appreciate the task facing a language learner who is intending to participate in the real world speech event of the lecture. What is missing from the transcript is the whole category of contingent factors referred to as performance conditions. These include not only the requirement that one be able to process the text of the lecture at the actual rate and under the acoustic conditions and ambient noise that obtain but also keep up that performance for the typical fifty minutes that lectures last.

Relating these observations to the claims advanced here, one can say that the teacher/course designer needs to focus on all the realities of language use if he/she is to appreciate the task facing the language learner. In an informal survey of newly arrived overseas students at Flinders University, inability to follow lectures under the acoustic conditions in classrooms and at the speaking rate of most lecturers was cited as the principal difficulty in comprehension.

Further, consideration of language use as a real world performance generates questions for applied research into language acquisition that are based on a conception of language use from a language learner's perspective. One can be led, for example, into data collection into typical rates of utterances of classes of speakers (see Tauroza and Allison 1990 as an example of this kind of fundamental data collection and analysis). Moreover, if we take the ability to comprehend speech in a range of native speaker accents as a performance condition, it would also appear that this can be a difficulty even in second language situations (in Singapore, for example, if my experience is not untypical).

3 SOME IMPLICATIONS OF SLA RESEARCH

The discussion above focuses on the limitations of SLA research. There are, however, other implications and I want to consider just three rather broad ones.

Difficulties in natural second language acquisition

Somewhat paradoxically, the most important implication of SLA research for formal language teaching, in my view, is not in found in the descriptions of stages of acquisition, but rather in its detailed exposition of what learners do NOT succeed in learning in natural settings. This is aptly summed up by Huebner: "Unlike first language acquisition, second language acquisition ... is a phenomenon neither universally experienced nor uniformally successful" (1988:1). Putting aside worries about his assumption that first language acquisition is uniformally successful (if one takes the

very broad view of what is adequate), we can see in the failures of learners in acquiring second languages in natural settings (that is, through communication) reasons to doubt the claims of the strong version of the communicative approach. This version holds that all aspects of communicative proficiency in the new language are to be learned "communicatively" and only "communicatively", through mere exposure.

Now it may be objected that such a claim has never been made explicitly in any published defence of, or promotion of, communicative language teaching. This is true. However, underlying much of what is said and written about course design and classroom practice for communicative language teaching is this very claim (never stated, of course, but clearly assumed). One is asked "is your lesson truly communicative?", there is reference to "the communicative classroom", suggestions for learning activities are often rejected on the grounds that the exercise proposed is not truly "communicative", and so on. As Richards (1984) pointed out, methods have a "secret life" of their own which in this case reveals itself in the unwitting extension of the reasonable claims for communicative language teaching (as set out, for example, in Johnson 1988) into untested assumptions about the universal efficacy of authentic communicative practice for learning all aspects of language use.

What is significant in the findings of research into SLA in natural settings is that, despite hundreds or perhaps thousands of hours of authentic language use, most learners do not fully master the new language and its use, and many do not achieve much at all. Moreover, when one takes the broad view of communication, there are many aspects of language use that native speakers do not acquire without specific teaching and this despite years of authentic practice in just those kinds of use (one might mention spelling, the conventions of punctuation, effective ways of arranging the content of formal written documents, the conventions for setting out formal letters, the conventions for citing and listing references in academic essays and so on).

The examples given above might seem trivial and peripheral (though not if one takes the demands of real life readers into account). But, in the case of "natural" second language acquisition, the shortcomings also include mastery of the language system, and of grammar in particular. Though one cannot claim that communicative approaches or published defences of them disregard the language system, there is certainly evident a tendency to play down the learning of grammar in particular. The "message focus" of communicative classroom activities and tasks leads supporters to emphasise the meaning or message of communication over the "form" (which may soon become for many teachers and students "mere form"). Quite apart from the rather unsophisticated view of grammar that such descriptions imply, they lead to an underestimation of what is involved in developing a truly proficient command of a new language. SLA research indirectly reveals the difficulties of learning grammar "communicatively" and hence calls into question some of the assumptions of communicative language teaching. Moreover, as Skibicki 1985 points out, many highly successful learners of second languages in natural settings are aware of their grammatical shortcomings and specifically request instruction of some kind in grammar.

If real life language use does not result in full command even of the relatively closed system of grammar, then in formal classroom language courses grammar will have to be taught. In saying that grammar (and other aspects of the language system) will need to be taught, I am using the word *teach* very broadly. The sense of the word *teach* is to be taken as "to arrange opportunities for students to learn in some effective way". This might include, but is certainly not limited to, explaining grammatical rules, but in any case does imply that there is a systematic and deliberate attempt by the teacher to help students learn whatever needs to be learnt. Moreover, the definition of language learning includes the requirement that whatever has been learnt has been learnt successfully only to the extent that it is available for communicative use.

The shortcomings of competence models in applied SLA

In discussing grammar and SLA research, we come to another implication for classroom language learning and the research that supports it. The reigning paradigm for the study of linguistic proficiency in this research, I think it is fair to claim, is competence grammar. The model assumed in a given research project will be based more or less closely on Chomsky's conception of the speaker's language-using capacity as a linguistic competence that is drawn on by certain performance mechanisms in language use. This is certainly true of those studies of SLA that are undertaken for theoretical purposes (testing the viability of the universal grammar hypothesis, for instance). The best example of this kind of research is that published in the journal *Second Language Acquisition* which, as the editors point out, is devoted to "theory-internal" issues and avoids applied research (see Pankhurst and Sharwood-Smith 1985).

The implication to be drawn from an examination of theoretical and applied SLA research is that competence models, though perhaps useful for theoretical purposes, are not what is required for applied research into SLA in either natural or classroom settings. The difficulty in conceiving of the development of linguistic proficiency in competence terms is that once one takes this perspective, the focus is on language as knowledge rather than as social and cognitive actions of language users. As far as formal language learning is concerned, proficiency in language is proficiency in utterance processing, that is, in encoding and decoding linguistic signals in the course of communication.

Quite apart from the question of what competence models actually represent, the only worthwhile evidence for competence is instances of performance under real life conditions. Many fluent speakers of foreign languages make unsystematic slips, different in kind from those of native speakers, that call into question the value of competence notions. In the end, we are interested not in competence but only in consistent performance.

4 AN OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY

Putting aside the competence/performance question, we can say that in considering the development of linguistic proficiency for applied purposes -- understood of course, in relation to real life language use -- we need to adopt an operational perspective, looking not a questions of competence or at sentences as products or objects but rather at linguistic processing and at the development of the cognitive operations required for the production and interpretation of felicitous, appropriate grammatical strings in the second or foreign languages. This point has been well put by Pienemann and Johnston who claim that any applied SLA research that "does not begin with a plausible model of an accompanying processor is most certainly condemned from the outset to failure" (1987:66). Though it is important, following Halliday's well-known injunction, to look at language use from an inter-organism perspective, it is also important in understanding second and foreign language acquisition for applied purposes to adopt an intra-organism perspective.

This is to say, one needs to develop a model of language processing that is suitable for the applied purposes of second and foreign language learning, providing researchers and course designers with a description of the object of learning, namely language processing. There is a tendency to believe that as soon as one introduces the term *model* one is committed to adopting a particular model developed within theoretical research. But it is also possible to have an applied model which is based on a description of the task that is appropriate to its problem-solving purpose, and which does not necessarily depend upon a theoretical model in the same domain.

The distinguishing characteristic of an applied model of language processing and language acquisition is that it should take an operational perspective, and deal with coding (that is, encoding and decoding).

In Chomskyan terms, the notion operation will fuse together the notions of competence and performance (production and parsing mechanisms). The utterances and parts of utterances of connected text are signals that are created with reference to what the speaker intends to convey and according to the coding rules of the given language. We look at the task of the language user as being the creation of a meaning to be encoded, the encoding of that meaning, and the actual production of the utterance in the course of communication in which he or she will be engaging in other higher level planning and processing.

In the early stages of formal second language acquisition and throughout foreign language acquisition, language use is a matter of high-speed problem-solving, learning to find the code-required form of words to convey the intended meaning and, in comprehension, learning to attend to the code-specified signals for the code-delimited meanings that they represent. In speech, this includes learning to make the different fundamental semantic structurings of the message required in topic-comment languages or subject-predicate languages. It includes learning to make the decisions imposed by compulsory but otherwise unnecessary code-internal rules that have semantic consequences: in English, making decisions on the definiteness of nouns for the appropriate choice of indefinite or definite determiners, for example. It also includes learning to resolve purely syntactic problems with no semantic consequences that arise in the ongoing planning of an utterance: computing the grammatical subject of verbs for verb-noun agreement, for example.

In general, it is more helpful in trying to understand the task of the learner in formal settings to see it, not as a matter of acquiring knowledge or competence, but rather as mastering the complex set of lexical, grammatical and phonological operations that are involved in the production and parsing of utterances. When this task in considered in relation to communicative performance in authentic exchanges, mastery of the system means that the low level processing or problem solving makes so few demands on attention that other kinds of planning and processing that are required for discourse interpretation and planning can proceed efficiently. Many of the linguistic slips made by fluent foreign language speakers are, like those of native speakers, best accounted for in processing terms. More broadly, the task of learning a new language system is a matter of learning to code, that is encode and decode, signals according to the meaning-making resources and within the code-specific categories and code-internal rules of the system. To the extent that SLA research is based either on competence models of the speaker's hypothesised linguistic knowledge or on structural grammars that describe sentences, it is of less use in course design than it might be if it adopted a processing perspective.

There are many other consequences of adopting this operational account of language acquisition that cannot be developed here. In general the contribution of this paper to one of the principal aims of this seminar is that it raises the general question of whether what counts as language from a theoretical perspective matches the view of successful language acquisition that is adopted in educational settings. It further argues that there is a need for the development of models of language processing and language acquisition that are based on language processing and language acquisition as they appear to the learner in formal educational settings. These models will serve to generate questions for autonomous applied research into formal language learning and will at the same time provide an initial frame of reference for the relevance of other kinds of research into language and second and first language acquisition.

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